

Nathaniël Kunkeler, *Narratives of Decline in the Dutch National Socialist Movement, 1931-1945*

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In January 1942, an article by an elderly member of the Dutch *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* (National Socialist Movement, NSB), appeared in the party weekly, *Volk en Vaderland*. The anonymous member reported that he had been a fascist since before 1914: 'For already then I was burdened with the realisation that our entire culture had degenerated'.¹ To his mind it was the Great War which brought degeneration to a crisis, but also a cure: fascism. The time had come 'to no longer stand and worry alone about the threatening downfall of the Netherlands and Europe'.²

In 1931, Anton Mussert founded the NSB, after a number of failed attempts by fascists to create a unified movement in the 1920s. Though Mussert's respectability appalled more radical fascist organisations like the General Dutch Fascist Union or Black Front, the NSB soon outgrew all other fascist parties in the Netherlands.³ In the 1935 Provincial Elections it won more than 300 000 votes, a spectacular 7.94%.⁴ Against a background of economic depression and dysfunctional cabinets, the NSB exploited the socially notoriously divided nation, portraying itself as the saviour of the Netherlands, intervening when the ruling Catholic-Calvinist coalition seemed reduced to ineffectual bickering, while Bolshevism threatened. The nation was in decline, *verval*, and faced collapse. A sense of decline is commonly associated with the *fin de siècle*, but there is much evidence to suggest that despair about the future of Europe was even stronger after the First World War.⁵ For instance, Richard Overy has argued that the '*fin de siècle* consciousness', the morbid view of the West, civilisation as a moribund organism, was even more current by 1939 than it was in

¹ *Volk en Vaderland*, 9:1, 2 Jan 1942, p. 4. All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

² *Ibid.*

³ Wim Zaal, *De Nederlandse Fascisten* (Amsterdam: Aspekt, 2016), pp. 80–81; Robin te Slaa and Edwin Klijn, *De NSB: Ontstaan En Opkomst van de Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging, 1931-1935* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2010), p. 200.

⁴ A. A. de Jonge, *Het Nationaal-Socialisme in Nederland: Voorgeschiedenis, Ontstaan En Ontwikkeling*, 2nd edn (Den Haag: Kruseman, 1979), pp. 100–101.

⁵ *Fin de Siècle and Its Legacy*, ed. by Mikuláš Teich and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 1–9.

1914.⁶ In 1935 the respected Dutch historian and cultural critic Johan Huizinga published *In the Shadows of Tomorrow*, which analysed the degeneration of morality and politics caused by the onset of modern mass culture.⁷ Fear of decline in the interwar Netherlands was quite mainstream,⁸ and the NSB was in a strong position to exploit it, as an outsider that could break up the pillarised political system that defined Dutch politics, and make a plausible claim to being an anti-liberal party of unity.

The controversy around Roger Griffin's 'New Consensus' has brought themes of rebirth in fascist political culture to the fore in the past two decades, but its implicit counterpart – decline – remains largely unexamined in its own right.⁹ Arguing in the early 90s that European fascism was best understood generically as a political ideology centred on the myth of ultra-nationalist rebirth, Griffin aroused a debate about fascist myths and ideology at a time when political-cultural history was trending in fascism studies.¹⁰ While Griffin has produced extensive work on the fascist sense of a new beginning, the sense of decline has often been assumed to be merely a continuation of *fin de siècle* cultural pessimism.¹¹ Historians of fascism like Robert O. Paxton or Stanley G. Payne have produced accounts of the fascist obsession with decline, but reductively treated it as symptomatic of national crises; the origin of the more important dialectical palingenetic response which was the impetus to ideological action.¹² Other scholars like Aristotle Kallis have analysed how fascist myths, such as decline and rebirth, fed immediately into fascist political action, with real and deadly effects.¹³ But the substance and the production of these myths require further exploration. Decline is a concept that covers a rich variety of narratives. Figures like Nietzsche or Spengler are

⁶ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain and the Crisis of Civilization, 1919-1939* (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 1–5.

⁷ Johan Huizinga, *In de Schaduwen van Morgen: Een Diagnose van het Geestelijk Lijden van onzen Tijd*, 6th edn (Haarlem: H.D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon N.V., 1936), p. 118; See also H.L. Wesseling, 'From Cultural Historian to Cultural Critic: Johan Huizinga and the Spirit of the 1930s', *European Review*, 10.4 (2002), 485–99.

⁸ A. A. de Jonge, *Crisis En Critiek Der Democratie: Anti-Democratische Stromingen En de Daarin Levende Denkbeelden over de Staat in Nederland Tussen de Wereldoorlogen* (Utrecht: HES, 1982).

⁹ Roger Griffin, 'The Primacy of Culture: The Current Growth (Or Manufacture) of Consensus within Fascist Studies', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 37.1 (2002), 21–43; Roger Griffin, 'Palingenetischer Ultranationalismus: Die Geburtswehen einer neuen Faschismusdeutung', in *Der Faschismus in Europa: Wege der Forschung*, ed. by Thomas Schlemmer and Hans Woller (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2014), pp. 17–33.

¹⁰ Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Oxon: Routledge, 1993), pp. 32–39.

¹¹ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Arnd Bauerkämper, *Der Faschismus in Europa 1918-1945* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006), p. 29; Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (London: The Free Press, 1997), p. 102.

¹² Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 218–20.

¹³ Aristotile Kallis, 'Fascism, "Licence" and Genocide: From the Chimera of Rebirth to the Authorization of Mass Murder', in *Rethinking the Nature of Fascism: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by António Costa Pinto (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 227–70.

too often used to quickly summarise a mythic mainstay of interwar fascism that was in reality ideologically complex and highly varied. At the same time the origins and practical processes behind the construction of these narratives remains to be researched, especially among non-regime movements. The NSB was by no means the only fascist organisation in the Netherlands, but it was by far the largest, and the only legal political party during the German Occupation, making it a good case study for comparative analysis. Groups like the NSB are still at times dismissed by scholars, as negligible and ‘mimetic’.¹⁴

This article focuses on narratives of decline in the NSB during its existence from 1931 to 1945, arguing that these mythic narratives gave the NSB an ideological coherence which Dutch historians have frequently argued the movement lacked.¹⁵ Narratives of decline fulfilled several functions within the party. This case study shows that, if we foreground the mythic aspects of fascism, they quickly reveal themselves as unique and ideologically complex organisations, whose relations with other European fascists, especially Italy and Germany, were by no means unidirectional or straightforward. The motif of decline reveals the NSB not as partaker of a common or generic fascist myth, but as an heir of Dutch liberal-historicist traditions, of immediate importance to its fate.

I

Under Anton Adriaan Mussert (1894-1946), *Leider* of the NSB, there was no need for rigid ideological conformity. A former member of the liberal conservative *Vrijheidsbond* [Freedom Union], his work as civil engineer of water management in Utrecht (1920-1934) brought him into nationalist politics when the 1925 Belgian Treaty unexpectedly united water management with nationalist politics.¹⁶ The treaty allowed Belgian access to the Moerdijk channel via Antwerp, and under the treaty, supported by France, the right to pass through the channels with war ships if necessary. Mussert became a leading figure in the nationalist protest against the treaty, which was

¹⁴ *Fascism*, ed. by Roger Griffin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 169.

¹⁵ Ronald Havenaar, *De NSB Tussen Nationalisme En 'Volkse' Solidariteit: De Vooroorlogse Ideologie van de Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging in Nederland* ('s-Gravenhage: Staatsuitgeverij, 1983), pp. 131–32.

¹⁶ ‘Mussert als waterstaatsingenieur, 1920-1934’, in Tessell Pollmann, *Mussert & Co: De NSB-Leider En Zijn Vetrouwelingen* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2012), pp. 28–50.

abandoned under the pressure.¹⁷ Success in politics eventually led Mussert, a ‘thoroughly decent and respectable *bourgeois*’,¹⁸ to found the National Socialist Movement in December 1931, together with his colleague Cornelis van Geelkerken.¹⁹ Some Dutch historians have claimed Mussert’s version of National Socialism only had style and appearance in common with ‘real’ fascism.²⁰ When pushed to develop ideological doctrine, Mussert proclaimed Dutch National Socialism to have Three Sources: faith in God; love of People and Fatherland; respect for Labour. No doubt a liberal interpretation of National Socialism, he meant there were many aspects to National Socialism, ‘like a jewel with many facets’.²¹

Thus it should come as no surprise that different – even conflicting – ideologies bloomed in the NSB, just as divergent narratives of decline also proliferated.²² These narratives underpinned ideological positions in the NSB, highlighting ideological difference. The Hegelian faction, headed by van Lunteren, is an interesting case of specific narratives of decline in the NSB. Van Lunteren’s influence in *Volk en Vaderland* [VoVa] was noticeable from the moment he became editor in May 1933, particularly due to his promotion of the Dutch Hegelian philosopher G.J.P.J. Bolland.²³ Bolland’s proverbs were placed in spare spaces between columns, with advertisements for the annual meeting of the Bolland Society (free entrance for NSB members).²⁴ A peculiarly Hegelian construction of decline stood out. VoVa consolidated the symptoms of decline into a ‘general crisis in the process of current world history’.²⁵ The crisis expressed itself as a struggle of ideologies:

¹⁷ Ronald Havenaar, *Anton Adriaan Mussert: Verrader voor het Vaderland* (Den Haag: Kruseman, 1984), pp. 19–21; for a comprehensive history of the treaty, with a summary in English, see R. L. Schuurmsma, *Het Onaannemelijk Tractaat: Het Verdrag Met België van 3 April 1925 in de Nederlandse Publieke Opinie* (Groningen: H. D. Tjeenk Willink, 1975).

¹⁸ Jan Meyers, *Mussert: Een Politiek Leven* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Arbeiderspers, 1984), p. 38.

¹⁹ ‘Mussert en Kees van Geelkerken’, in Pollmann, pp. 110–17.

²⁰ Koen Vossen, *Vrij Vissen in Het Vondelpark: Kleine Politieke Partijen in Nederland 1918-1940* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2003), pp. 166–67; Slaa and Klijn, p. 123.

²¹ Amsterdam, NIOD, Archive 123 (NSB)/1.1: inventory no 71. Speech, Mussert, 9 October 1937, Lunteren, p. 9. See also *Voor Volk En Vaderland: De Strijd Der Nationaal Socialistische Beweging 1931 - 14 December - 1941*, ed. by Cornelis van Geelkerken, 2nd edn (Utrecht: Nenasu, 1943), p. 507.

²² Jonge, *Crisis En Critiek Der Democratie*, p. 221.

²³ Gerard J.P.J. Bolland (1854-1922) was an influential philosopher at the University of Leiden, and instigated a Hegelian revival in Dutch academia. In the 1920s Bolland gained avid devotees among Dutch fascist groups for his virulently anti-democratic and anti-Semitic opinions, perhaps best summarised in his 1921 lecture, ‘The Signs of the Times’. Jonge, *Het Nationaal-Socialisme in Nederland*, pp. 21–22; see also, republished in 1940, G.J.P.J. Bolland, *De Teekenen des Tijds*, 2nd edn (Amsterdam: W. Versluys’ Uitgeverij, 1940).

²⁴ *VoVa*, 1:22, 3 June 1933, p. 3.

²⁵ ‘Fascistische Studies, II.’, *VoVa*, 1:21, 27 May 1933, p. 2.

We, as a nation, have to move through the world completely independently, but in doing so we have to participate in the battle of ideologies, in the process of the (West-European) World Spirit. [...] The spiritual life of the Netherlands is luckily not yet petrified in all segments of the population...²⁶

While such a narrative easily incorporated popular themes like the fall of democracy and the rise of Communism, the Hegelians clothed them in theoretical garb. But notions like the World Spirit had little appeal to most NSB members, who frequently found the articles unreadably boring, so that such theorising was soon relegated to less popular NSB periodicals.²⁷

Another example of the distinctive nature of the decline narratives that thrived in NSB discourse is Robert van Genechten, editor of *Nieuw Nederland*, and head of the party Department of Education.²⁸ Though himself a former lawyer and university teacher, he enjoyed attacking the universities as sites of intellectual chaos, especially humanistic Leiden.²⁹ Humanism was his personal obsession, and shaped much of his writing; especially during the German Occupation: '[National Socialism] does not lament the downfall of humanist culture, for it knows that it undermined the people's power'.³⁰ Genechten's concern also shaped the departmental material he wrote, such as a 1941 booklet for internal education, listing the 'cardinal sins of the modern era': first and foremost humanism, followed by modernism, rationalism, individualism, materialism, and democracy.³¹

The ideological faction which eventually proved most important to the NSB was that of the *volkse* [racial] fascists, heavily influenced by German Nazism. People like E.J. Roskam, agricultural expert; Hendrik Feldmeijer, future leader of the Dutch SS; and the Austrian-Dutch Rost van Tonningen, a friend of Himmler, who joined the NSB at his behest, employed notions of *bloed en bodem*, and viewed state and *volk* as antithetical.³² From the 1935 onwards the *volkse* faction grew stronger in the NSB. Consequently, Jews took an increasingly prominent place in

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ NIOD, 123/2.01: 397. Letter, H.J. van Houten to F.E. Farwerck, Arnhem, 18 Juli 1933, p. 3.

²⁸ Jonge, *Crisis En Critiek Der Democratie*, pp. 253–56.

²⁹ Robert van Genechten, *Een Jong Nederland in een Jong Europa* (Rotterdam: Nenasu, 1941), p. 6.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 4.

³¹ *De strijd tusschen nat.-socialisme en fascisme eenerzijds en kapitalisme en bolsjewisme anderzijds* (NSB, Afdeling Vorming, 1941), pp. 2–3.

³² See the introduction to *Correspondentie van M.M. Rost van Tonningen*, ed. by E. Fraenkel-Verkade, A. J. van der Leeuw, and David Barnouw, 2 vols ('s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1967), pp. 37–40.

official NSB discourse as the villains in the Dutch story of decline. In 1937, VoVa articles warned of Jews in the Netherlands, and the traditional Marxist enemy became a mere precursor to Jewry in the narrative of decline: 'Marxism prepares the path for Jewish domination'.³³ In 1938 there was a sharp increase in anti-Semitic rhetoric in VoVa, and the theme of International Jewry and German-Jewish refugees came to the fore.³⁴ But non-*volkse* decline narratives not only persisted alongside, but in combination with *volkse* narratives. One speech at a 1938 rally provides an excellent example:

Also under the worst possible state form a people does not perish immediately. It becomes sick, it languishes, it shrivels, gradually it necrotises, it is as if it were rotting away. This process can last tens, sometimes hundreds of years, but the end is death, usually through a blow from outside, unless it comes to its senses.³⁵

The speaker proceeded to state that this process of decay had affected *the Germanic people* for centuries, emphasising an ideological shift that had taken place in the NSB: the victim of decline was the *volk*, not the nation, and the *volk* was Germanic, and as such part of Europe, rather than a nation-state. The people needed to be prepared to fulfil its task in Europe, during the last stage of the 'liberal, democratic, capitalist, marxist state'.³⁶

II

While decline narratives functionally highlighted ideological disparity, they paradoxically also served to tie differences together into a coherent political message about the contemporary state of the Netherlands. For this purpose *Volk en Vaderland* was the principal tool. It was widely taken for granted that whoever wanted to know the NSB, should first of all read VoVa.³⁷ The high sales of the weekly newspaper were attributed not least to Mussert's editorials, which granted it a special air of authority compared to other NSB publications, none of which sold nearly as well. The Dutch

³³ 'Het marxisme is wegbereider voor Joodsche overheersing.', *VoVa*, 5:11, 12 Mar 1937, p. 2.

³⁴ See for instance: *VoVa*, 6:46, 18 Nov 1938, p. 1.

³⁵ NIOD, 123/1.1:87. Speech MS, Kemp, Lunteren, 18 Aug 1938, pp. 1-2.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jonge, *Het Nationaal-Socialisme in Nederland*, p. 4; Maarten Cornelis van den Toorn, *Wij Melden U Den Nieuwen Tijd: Een Beschouwing van Het Woordgebruik van de Nederlandse Nationaal-Socialisten* ('s-Gravenhage: SDU, 1991), p. 4.

daily newspapers usually got their information about the movement from VoVa.³⁸ The Department of Press and Propaganda valued the paper immensely: 'It is known that VoVa is still one of our best propaganda tools', according to the head of distribution in Haarlem.³⁹ The NSB put a staggering amount of organisation and resources into propaganda, and VoVa was the core of that effort. At a 1944 meeting between Mussert and NSB District Leaders he still insisted, while the Allies were invading the Netherlands, that '[o]ne thing of great importance is the edition of "VoVa". You must ensure that they are delivered.'⁴⁰ Nevertheless, by June 1944, one District Leader had to confess that VoVa sales were decreasing due to material shortages, while distributors found it difficult to get around without bicycles, since no new tires could be provided. Many copies were bought just to pack fish or flowers.⁴¹ But before its last years the newspaper managed to reach hundreds of thousands, as excellent organisation, financial resources, and media interest, ensured its message percolated through large portions of the Dutch population.

Considering VoVa's role within the NSB's propaganda apparatus, it was crucial in the propagation of the movement's narratives of decline. The format of a weekly newspaper proved ideally suited to the narratives' construction. Naturally a news-focused paper, it was well-suited to injecting the ideas of decline that circulated in the Netherlands and Europe with immediate relevance. Issues of VoVa were focused on particular themes to drive home the message of the week effectively. Numerous circulars have survived from the Department of Press and Propaganda which instructed the editorial team and the writers on the weekly topics, and what arguments to make, to ensure a common party line. For instance the week after 11 January 1936, the topic was the failures of Prime Minister Hendrik Colijn, and their origins in the growing 'fission fungus', which threatened to 'suffocate the last remnants of national unity and power'. The 'demo-liberal establishment', individualism, and universal suffrage were to be highlighted as the origins of national division and weakness.⁴² For the 7 March, the topic was Franco-Belgian influence on the 'democratic' rulers, and 'COMMUNISM AT THE GATES!'.⁴³

³⁸ Pollmann, p. 67; Slaa and Klijn, pp. 183, 521.

³⁹ NIOD, 123/2.01:531. Instructions for colportage, Head of Colportage, Haarlem, 27 Aug. 1941, p. 1.

⁴⁰ NIOD, 123/1.2: 231. Report meeting of Leider with District Leader and Heads, 20 March 1944, Utrecht, p. 14.

⁴¹ Ibid., Meeting minutes, 20 June 1944, Utrecht, pp. 29-30.

⁴² NIOD, 123/2.01:527. Circular, 'Onderwerp voor de komende week', 11 Jan 1936. Italics in original.

⁴³ Ibid. Circular, 'Onderwerp voor de komende week, 7 Mar 1936.

While VoVa recycled many of the themes of decline found in rightist discourse since the early 1920s – unsurprisingly as many NSB top figures had been active fascists in the previous decade – it integrated them with nationally specific topics. Thus, while VoVa employed the familiar rhetoric of the powerlessness of the ordinary political parties, apathy, faithlessness, and division as symptoms of ‘the downfall of the nation’, it painted a specifically Dutch picture.⁴⁴ An article about one of the NSB’s favourite target groups, farmers, exemplifies this approach: ‘The farmer in the Netherlands became the victim of his political alienation... That he was ever capable of taking care of himself would be easy to prove, if our government let go its free trade idea...’.⁴⁵ Referring to specific laws concerning agricultural pricing and trade regulations, the ‘road of suffering’ of the ‘industrious’ farmers was tied directly to the economic depression, unemployment, and liberal government.⁴⁶ ‘[E]very day new victims fall into the maelstrom of insane state management. [...] In fast tempo everyone goes to the economic abyss, from which they will never rise again...’⁴⁷ Another recurring threat in VoVa’s narratives was the potential loss of the colonial empire. (‘The Indies Lost – Disaster Born’, was an oft-repeated slogan in defence of military spending.) In 1935, as the Provincial Elections approached – the first in which the NSB participated – VoVa attacked the decadence of Parliament, which neglected the Dutch Navy and Air Force, threatening to drive the Netherlands off the sea.⁴⁸

The conventional fascist lament of growing national division and conflict, was given a Dutch spin by concentrating on pillarisation [*verzuiling*], the segmentation of Dutch society into a confessional and political pillars [*zuilen*]: Catholics, Calvinists, Socialists, and to a lesser extent Liberals. Each pillar had its own political parties, trade unions, newspapers, radio slots, sport and leisure clubs, creating a sense of community, and optimising social control.⁴⁹ As much as ninety percent of the Dutch population was to some extent pillarised, even if the efficacy and nature of

⁴⁴ ‘Rede van Mussert op den Landdag’, *VoVa*, 1:2, 14 Jan 1933, p. 1.

⁴⁵ ‘De Lijdensweg der Boeren’, *VoVa*, 1:32, 12 Aug 1933, p. 2.

⁴⁶ The Great Depression in the Netherlands was delayed but particularly severe, with 100 000 unemployed by 1931, and over 400 000 by 1933, figures which remained static until 1939. Jonge, *Het Nationaal-Socialisme in Nederland*, p. 40.

⁴⁷ Ibid. See also *Vova*, nos 2:20, pp. 1,4; 2:44, p. 1; 3:30, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁸ *VoVa*, 3:10, 9 Mar 1935, pp. 3, 6, 7.

⁴⁹ Friso Wielenga, *A History of the Netherlands: From the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 174; for an analysis of the formation of the pillars in the nineteenth century, see *De Verzuiling Voorbij: Godsdienst, Stand En Natie in de Lange Negentiende Eeuw*, ed. by J. C. H. Blom and J. Talsma (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2000).

pillarisation has been questioned in more recent scholarship;⁵⁰ nevertheless it was a serious concern to contemporaries.⁵¹ VoVa contrasted the division of recent years with the idealised unity of 1914-1918.⁵² 'Now behold the result: our people is divided by the party bigwigs into boxes of different colours – gone is unity; since then the Netherlands is divided in itself. [...] ... we despise all box-building [*hokjesgetimmer*]'.⁵³ This sectarianism [*hokjes- en schotjesgeest*] remained the focus for NSB discourse about division until the very end. In April 1945 VoVa still warned that victory for the Allies would come at the cost of a return of social division to the Netherlands.⁵⁴ Due to the confessional nature of pillarisation, it was natural that VoVa paid special attention to religious divisions, which became a frequent theme in the second half of the thirties, when the NSB was under fire from the Churches.⁵⁵

Decay [*bederf*] is always and everywhere present. [...] There have always been people, who abuse their spiritual office to exercise political pressure... But there are times, like at the end of the Middle Ages and our time, when business is sanctioned by ecclesiastical authorities. ... Each collapsing structure has its own forms of corruption, determined by circumstance.⁵⁶

In the same issue VoVa portrayed the political alliance between the Roman Catholic State Party and the Reformed parties as a threat to religion. In an article entitled 'Freedom of Conscience under Threat: The Confessional Parties are a Danger to Religion', it reproduced a speech by Catholic NSB Senator Marchant d'Ansembourg.⁵⁷ The confessional parties had achieved their

⁵⁰ Janneke Adema, 'Verzuling als metafoor voor modernisering', in: *Moderniteit: Modernisme en massacultuur in Nederland 1914-1940*, ed. by Madelon de Keizer and Sophie Tates (Zutphen: NIOD/Walburg Pers, 2004), pp. 265–66.

⁵¹ Remieg Aerts and others, *Land van Kleine Gebaren: Een politieke geschiedenis van Nederland 1780-1990* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1999), pp. 200–01.

⁵² Erik Hansen, 'Fascism and Nazism in the Netherlands, 1929-39', *European Studies Review*, 3 (1981), 355–85 (pp. 359–60).

⁵³ 'Eenheid Temidden van Verdeeldheid', *VoVa*, 1:6, 11 Feb 1933, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Illustration, *VoVa*, 13:3, 6 Apr 1945, p. 2.

⁵⁵ Rather naïvely Mussert appealed to Mussolini to use his influence at the Vatican to put an end to the censure of the Dutch episcopacy. NIOD, 123/1.1:61. Letter (carbon copy), Mussert to Mussolini, 23 Apr 1937, Utrecht.

⁵⁶ 'Barmat', *VoVa*, 5:47, 19 Nov 1937, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Max Marchant et d'Ansembourg was a Catholic aristocrat, and mayor of the town of Amstenrade in the Catholic South, until he gave up his position to join the NSB. d'Ansembourg's lineage and position lent the NSB a great deal of prestige and respectability, but antagonised the episcopacy. See for instance the 1935 correspondence between d'Ansembourg and the Bishop of Roermond in The Hague, National Archive, NSB Gewest III: 2.19.049, dossier 10.

original objective, ‘the recognition of the Christian foundation of our people’, meaning they were no longer needed. Their coalition in parliament entailed democratic compromise of religious principles, harming religious morality. Unfortunately the ‘connection of party and Church’ made them appear united, and the faults of the party were ascribed to the Church; those who for religious reasons did not wish to be part of a confessional party were then regarded as bad Christians.⁵⁸ The article shows more than a little resentment at the treatment of Christian NSB members in their respective Churches, but also the stake the NSB had in highlighting pillarisation as the ultimate source of division in the Netherlands. It convincingly rooted the narrative of division and decline in a phenomenon that was an everyday reality for the Dutch, while discrediting the structures that kept the NSB out of power, and defined its place in politics and society.

III

So far it has been shown that a variety of sometimes mutually exclusive ideological currents co-existed under the aegis of Mussert, while narratives of decline constructed a more or less coherent political message. While VoVa was the principal expression of this function, Mussert also had a personal vision of the decline of the Netherlands, and one which left a deep impression on the NSB from its inception. What Mussert lacked in theoretical schooling and dogmatism he made up for with a myth of Dutch decline which possessed an authority beyond his own, and which provided the movement with an ideological constant that rivalled and absorbed all others.

The essence of Mussert’s vision was the historical Dutch Golden Age [*Gouden Eeuw*], the glory of the early modern Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, made great through its maritime empire. The Golden Age was invoked by the NSB salute: *Hou Zee* [Hold the Sea]. A 1941 NSB internal training booklet explained:

We use the salute which for hundreds of years, in the times of our greatest national pride, was used between our Holland sailors. *Hou Zee!*, the salute of van Tromp and De Ruyter [the renowned seventeenth Century admirals], has come forth out of our People and its nature [*volksaard*]... ... [Our forefathers] made our flags fly on the sea,

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 5.

they manifested their spiritual power and desire for enterprise, they built the imperium for which posterity can now be proud. [...] *Hou Zee!* It is the salute, the battle cry, which binds us warriors to the same Dutch ideal. It is the link to the glorious past of the Dutch People with the future which we want and *will* build!⁵⁹

In one internal speech Mussert spoke passionately about Dutch history and its abuse by the establishment: 'We will teach them to keep their hands off our men, who gave their property and blood for the honour of our people, which led an armada [1688], manned with 20 000 heads, and defeated France and England simultaneously to clear the path for the future of our people.'⁶⁰ Golden Age figures of history were re-interpreted as fascists: artists and poets like Joost van den Vondel held up in contrast to the writers of a decadent modern age. Early modern songs celebrating the Dutch Republic or William of Orange were invariably sung at rallies.⁶¹ A song of the paramilitary WA reimagined the corps as sixteenth century Calvinist rebel *geuzen* reincarnate - 'for the blood of their fathers burns in their soul / and they fight again as at Brill'.⁶² Dutch history truly started in 1568, and the narrative of decline consequently spanned centuries, re-configuring contemporary troubles to fit in with the story of the lost Golden Age. Present decline was understood as the early modern challenges in a modern guise. So the weakness of contemporary government was contrasted with that of the Dutch *stadhouders* ('Stadholder Prince William II: His Significance for Our Time'), while the death of William III of Orange marked the initiation of Dutch decline.⁶³ From that moment on, 'like now', national leadership was weak, 'and at the end of the eighteenth century entombed our people in the French coffin with pretty slogans, from which it arose, sleepwalking, in 1813, only to, if no great changes take place, finally sink back in this twentieth century or the next'.⁶⁴

Harking back to a past Golden Age was conventional enough for fascist movements, but it was of definitive significance to Mussert's perception of the Netherlands, the role of the NSB, and his own identity. He held on to this vision until the very end, his trial for high treason in 1945-46.

⁵⁹ *Wat Was en Is, Wat Deed en Doet, de NSB?* (Utrecht: NSB, 1941), p. 8.

⁶⁰ NIOD, 123/1.1:7. Speech MS, Mussert, Anton, 7 Sept 1932, Utrecht, p. 5.

⁶¹ NIOD, 123/1.1:37. Brochure, Programme for the 4th *Landdag*, 5 October 1935.

⁶² NIOD, 123/2.14:1127. Song booklet, *De WA zingt*, 13. 'De Geuzenvendels Rukken Aan'.

⁶³ Vessem. A.J. van, 'Stadhouder Prins Willem II: Zijn beteekenis voor onzen tijd', *VoVa*, 3:20, 18 May 1935, p. 6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 7.

Defending his collaboration with Nazi Germany, he vainly used ‘an example from history of someone who has done greater things than I’. Mussert compared himself to Maurice of Orange who in 1607 sought the approval of Henry IV of France in order to continue fighting against Spain.⁶⁵ Being charged with treason, he also likened himself to Johan van Oldenbarnevelt and Cornelis de Witt.⁶⁶ In a letter to his wife, after he had received the death sentence, he imagined himself like Hugo Grotius.⁶⁷ This very personal identification with national history can be traced back to the beginning of Mussert’s political career in 1925, when he protested the Belgian Treaty, which he interpreted as an act of French imperialism comparable to early modern times, just as he would later draw parallels between contemporary events and historical Dutch crises. In the vindications Mussert wrote in prison for his actions during the German Occupation, he returned to the Belgian Treaty as the defining moment of his political development. ‘A healthy people with self-respect does not even get round to debating such an unworthy treaty. It does not even start doing so. There was something amiss in our people.’⁶⁸

Thus the NSB preoccupation with France, Belgium, and England as arch enemies in NSB narratives of decline should be understood as Mussert’s personal mark. In the first issue of *VoVa*, the paper promoted the ideal of Dietsland – the Greater Netherlands – arguing that Flanders had for centuries been ‘the dam that broke the French tidal wave’.⁶⁹ But, the article continued, now treacherous Holland has abandoned her old provinces, and the northern provinces are at risk of being ‘erased from the annals of history’, ‘after barely a century of greatness, ruined by three centuries of terrible disgrace’.⁷⁰ A new war in Western Europe was impending, and France would consummate her ‘sinister project’, and go yet further than her ‘evil student’, Belgium. The theme of a divided nation under threat from historical rivals continued in the 1930s. The issue of ‘political Catholicism’, the cynical political exploitation of Christianity on behalf of a foreign power (the Pope) explained with the Dutch Revolt:⁷¹ ‘No, our teeth clenched, the entire people its hands together, [*sic*] like in the years 1566 and afterwards. Never [*will*] our land and People [*be*] under

⁶⁵ *Het Proces Mussert* (Amsterdam: Rijkstinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, 1987), p. 214.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 112.

⁶⁷ Letter, Mussert to D., 14 Dec 1945, Scheveningen, in Mussert, *Nagelaten Bekentenissen*, p. 206.

⁶⁸ Mussert, *Nagelaten Bekentenissen*, p. 62.

⁶⁹ ‘Vlaanderen en Holland’, *VoVa*, 1:1, 7 Jan 1933, p. 2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Philip II of Spain and Charles V were examples of such political Catholicism. See: *VoVa*, 7:34, 25 Aug 1939, p. 8.

ruthless political Catholicism', as Mussert wrote in one propaganda brochure.⁷² During the Occupation France had to take a backseat as villain, while England's role was foregrounded, linking Golden Age imperial rivalry to the Nazi struggle against Britain.⁷³

A speech by Mussert on 1 May 1941 shows that the adoption of a *volkse* discourse of blood and race, and the Nazi attack on 'plutocracy', could co-exist with Mussert's patriotic narrative of decline. The speech emphasises how the numerous different themes and motifs of decline that Dutch and German fascism had developed could all be tied together into a single narrative. A titanic European war of Labour was now being waged against Capitalism and Plutocracy, 'the soulless representatives of a past doomed to collapse'; embodied by the Jews and Churchill. Judaeo-English capitalist exploitation was but yet another instance of the centuries-old desire of 'bellicose England' to claim Dutch colonial possessions, and the democrats of the Netherlands were their henchmen, exploiting the unemployed and the peasant class under 'Christian' capitalism.⁷⁴ 'In appearance they had power, ha!, yet in reality the democratic rulers in the Netherlands were prisoners of English plutocracy.'⁷⁵ Several other speeches that year repeated this narrative. In a manuscript for speeches to be delivered from 20 June to 30 August, Mussert's scribbled notes read: 'England blackmails Europe. After the death of de Ruyter, sovereign at sea.'⁷⁶ In a final rallying speech for the NSB in The Hague, radio broadcast on 7 April 1945, Mussert still considered it relevant to invoke the Flemish battle of 1302 to keep the French spirit outside its borders, and linked it, once more, to the Belgian treaty of 1925.⁷⁷ Mussert's deeply historicist and patriotic narrative of the decline of the Netherlands constructed an overarching vision for the NSB with a force and conviction other narratives lacked, reinforced by the authority of the *Leider*. Unlike the Hegelian narratives, marred by their academic and theoretical nature, or the dubious racial narratives of blood and soil fanatics, it was not blemished by inaccessibility but unfolded the fascist world view in patriotic motifs and characters which any liberally-educated Dutchman

⁷² NIOD, 123/1.1:98. Mussert, Preface to brochure: van Vlekke, June 1939, p. 5.

⁷³ Although in a letter to Arthur Seyss-Inquart in 1941, Mussert still spoke of the struggle against the democratic forces allied with England and France. NIOD, 123/1.1 113. Letter, Mussert to Seyss-Inquart, 18 Jun 1941, Utrecht. The Netherlands has been in decline in relation to England ever since the Spanish War of Succession, VoVa complained. VoVa, 12:35, 28 Aug 1942, p.1.

⁷⁴ NIOD, 123/1.1:134. Speech MS, Mussert, 1 May 1941, pp. 1-5.

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 5.

⁷⁶ Ibid. Speech MS, Mussert, Den Haag et al, 20 Jun-30 Aug 1941, p. 2.

⁷⁷ NIOD, 123/1.1:256. Lecture, Mussert, 'Ons Volksch Ontwaken', 7 Apr 1945, Pulchri Studio, Den Haag, p. 7. The speech was also published in a propaganda booklet by Nenasu. Anton Mussert, *Grondslag der Herrijzenis: Ons Volksch Ontwaken* (Utrecht: Nenasu, 1945).

understood. The drawback was that it risked alienating Catholic sympathisers, for whom the history of the Dutch Republic largely meant Calvinist oppression and exclusion, something which still aroused strong feelings at the time.⁷⁸

Mussert created a story for the Movement, and integrated and elevated their concerns in a Grand Narrative of the decline and fall of the Dutch Imperium. National defence, national unity, economic development and trade, freedom of religion – all centre pieces of NSB discourse – were lent extra weight due to their place in Mussert's narrative. It also explains some of the more parochial concerns of VoVa, such as the growing disrespect for national monuments and historical architecture.⁷⁹ It is also in this light one should regard Mussert's efforts and pride in attempting to save the eighteenth century Hospitality Tower of Zaltbommel in 1945, for which he tried to intervene with *Reichskommissar* Arthur Seyss-Inquart to prevent the *Wehrmacht* from demolishing it.⁸⁰ During his trial he would bring up the moment as a symbolic act of love for the Fatherland.⁸¹

Mussert's influence on, and attention to, VoVa is clear by now, and if the 'face of the NSB' was also 'the paper of the *Leider*',⁸² then Mussert's vision must be understood to have a special significance for the narratives of decline that did so much to define the NSB in the eyes of its followers and the public.⁸³ The assessment of some historians that Mussert lacked 'clearly outlined political ideas' and had nothing to contribute in this area must thus be heavily qualified at the very least.⁸⁴ As became even clearer during the Occupation, Mussert was by no means 'a moral and spiritual vacuum'.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Frans Verhagen, *Toen de katholieken Nederland veroverden: Charles Ruijs de Beerenbrouck 1873-1936* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2015), pp. 32–33.

⁷⁹ E.g. one early article on the Royal Palace in Amsterdam: 'The National Socialist Movement ... demands respect for the national monument. Come join our struggle.' 'Nationaal Monument', *VoVa*, 1:6, 11 Feb 1933, p. 2.

⁸⁰ NIOD, 123/1.1:113. Letter, Mussert to Seyss-Inquart, 8 Mar 1945, Almelo. It is unclear whether Mussert's letter played any role whatsoever in the survival of the *gasthuistoren*.

⁸¹ *Het Proces Mussert*, p. 217; Mussert also mentioned the episode in his vindictory history of the NSB, see 'De NSB in Oorlogstijd', in Mussert, *Nagelaten Bekentenissen*, p. 141.

⁸² Jan de Haas, *Dit moet jij weten over de Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging der Nederlanden* (Amsterdam: NSB, 1943), p. 37.

⁸³ Especially in light of semi-private remarks he made about another NSB publication, *Het Nationale Dagblad*: 'I am never sure whether today or tomorrow something won't appear in Het Nationale Dagblad. Every day there is a new surprise.' NIOD, 123/1.1:231. Report meeting of the *Leider* with Circle Leaders and Heads, 20 Mar 1944, Utrecht, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Jonge, *Het Nationaal-Socialisme in Nederland*, p. 77.

⁸⁵ Philip Rees, *Biographical Dictionary of the Extreme Right since 1890* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 274.

IV

On 10 May 1940, Germany invaded the Low Countries. After heavy civilian casualties, and the bombing of Rotterdam, the Dutch army surrendered on 15 May.⁸⁶ The Queen and government fled to London, depriving the Netherlands of (Dutch) political leadership, with a few notable exceptions such as Colijn and Linthorst Homan, leader of the *Vrijheidsbond*.⁸⁷ While the flight of Dutch leaders was itself a break with the old political order, the rift was complete when Hitler at the last minute decided to install a political authority. A *Reichskommissariat* was established 29 May, headed by Arthur Seyss-Inquart.⁸⁸ Though Seyss-Inquart was formally the highest authority in the Netherlands, responsible only to the *Führer*, he was not an omnipotent dictator in his fiefdom.⁸⁹ Instead, the administration of the *Reichskommissariat* has been described as a '*Kampf aller gegen alle*','⁹⁰ 'not a unity, but a conglomerate of individual bureaus', as both the NSDAP under Martin Bormann and Himmler's SS ensured they had representatives to promote their interests.⁹¹ Through five years of cooperation, intrigue, conspiracy, and quarrelling, this was the Nazi administration of the Netherlands. Rauter loyally served Himmler's interests, and successfully attained hegemony for the SS at the expense of the Party and the *Reichskommissar* by 1943.⁹²

With the collapse of the old order the NSB suddenly found itself in a radically altered position, as structures central to the narratives of decline through which it understood the world vanished. Within a matter of weeks its German ideological ally had established a National Socialist form of government in the Netherlands, and Dutch fascists no longer found themselves struggling against the agents of decline, but instead supporting the Nazi heralds of renewal. As Goebbels put it: 'Today in Europe we implement the same revolution which we have in Germany on a smaller scale. It is only the dimension which has changed.'⁹³

⁸⁶ Konrad Kwiet, *Reichskommissariat Niederlande: Versuch Und Scheitern Nationalsozialistischer Neuordnung* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1968), pp. 40–42.

⁸⁷ Wichert ten Have, *De Nederlandse Unie: Aanpassing, Vernieuwing En Confrontatie in Bezettingstijd 1940-1941* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1999), pp. 41, 159.

⁸⁸ Kwiet, p. 48.

⁸⁹ For an overview of the German administration, see Gerhard Hirschfeld, *Nazi Rule and Dutch Collaboration: The Netherlands under German Occupation 1940-1945* (Oxford: Berg, 1988), pp. 20–21.

⁹⁰ Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), p. 50.

⁹¹ Kwiet, p. 81.

⁹² Hans-Dietrich Looock, 'Zur "Grossgermanischen Politik" Des Dritten Reiches', *Vierteljahrshefte Für Zeitgeschichte*, 8.1 (1960), 37–63 (pp. 59–60).

⁹³ Kwiet, p. 51.

A crisis of narrative ensued in NSB discourse, as Mussert and his followers were forced to reconfigure their understanding of their position in the world. After a brief hiatus, VoVa published on 24 May a front page article by Mussert entitled 'From Old to New: The Netherlands on the Threshold of a New Age'.⁹⁴ The first issue of VoVa since the capitulation is worth looking at in detail, to underline the discursive shift in the new narratives that VoVa initially produced, particularly in the optimistic days before the imposition of the *Reichskommissariat*. The issue shows a sudden change in style, as news-oriented critical reporting became entirely defunct. Instead, Mussert mentions the recent past in wistful phrases redolent with retrospectively ironic relief: 'The democratic arbitrariness and injustice, to which we have been exposed for years, is at an end.'⁹⁵ Rather than lingering on past events, the issue was a forward-looking one, and Mussert showed doubts about the future. There was only one future for the Dutch People, a National Socialist future, and the People needed the NSB more than ever, according to the *Leider*.⁹⁶ 'Whoever is so foolish as to count on Anglo-French help to bring back the old life, understands nothing of the great time in which we live.'⁹⁷ While not previously averse to overblown biblical rhetoric, at this point motifs of Destiny and Providence started to proliferate. In an article on the heroic war effort of Dutch soldiers bravely defending their fatherland, VoVa concluded:

We live in that great, fantastic time, in which the sword of justice has corrected history; the chaff has been separated from the wheat. Providence gives us still the chance, under the protection of this sword, to put our hands to the plough. Onwards then, Netherlands: after the night comes the dawn!⁹⁸

The Occupation was a peculiar moment for Dutch fascists, as mythic narratives of decline and rebirth seemed to manifest in historical time. Their own roles in the narrative were transformed. With the state of decline relegated to the historical past, fascists now moved onwards and found themselves in the long-awaited state of renewal. 'The 10th of May is a turning point in the history of

⁹⁴ VoVa, 8:19, 10 May 1940, p. 7.

'Van Oud naar Nieuw: Nederland op den Drempel van den Nieuwen Tijd', VoVa, 8:20, 24 May 1940, p. 1.

⁹⁵ Mussert, Anton, VoVa, *ibid*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*. p. 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*. p. 5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*. p. 7.

our People. History will from now on always turn on this moment.⁹⁹ The mood seems to have been shared by the rank and file as well, who appeared to be fully taken in with the new situation. NSB members felt the time of decline and hardship lay behind them. One member wrote in her diary: 'The wounds struck in our people will heal. Those who have fallen we remember with reverence and gratitude. Now we must build a new future'.¹⁰⁰ This sentiment also had a literal dimension in the need to repair the damage wrought by the invasion. Seyss-Inquart's first decree concerned the repair of war damage, so that reconstruction [*wederopbouw*], metaphorical and literal, would become a keyword during the early Occupation period, but would be used by fascists until 1945 to denote the sweeping away of the ruins of the old, and the creation of the *Nieuwe Orde*.¹⁰¹ While the national dailies were filled with images of ruined roads, houses, and farms, with encouragement to *wederopbouw*, to fascists the notion had a special significance: the rebirth of the Netherlands as a National Socialist state.¹⁰²

However, as months passed and the NSB's political situation improved, the general mood of the population changed for the worse. The States-General was abolished, and instead the Germans exercised control through the mayors. Over time, more and more NSB members would be appointed mayor, a dismally unpopular decision as most people regarded them as criminal traitors.¹⁰³ With the restriction of free speech and other civil liberties, unrest grew. In a letter NSB regional leader d'Ansembourgh warned *Generalkommissar* Schmidt of the changes in Dutch law, the restrictions and confiscations for the war effort. 'One experiences these facts with horror and indignation, all the more since one has understood from the words of *Herrn* Reichskommissar that the internal political situation would remain untouched. It seems necessary to me to suitably clear up this apparent contradiction.'¹⁰⁴ As resistance against the authorities grew, they had to increasingly rely on the NSB as the only political group willing to collaborate.¹⁰⁵ By May 1943, Seyss-Inquart confessed to Himmler that the manpower provided by the NSB was indispensable, and that Mussert himself enjoyed too much support from Hitler who had informally declared him

⁹⁹ *VoVa*, 8:21, 31 May 1940, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Gerie de Jong, René Kok, and Erik Somers, *Naar Eer en Geweten: Gewone Nederlanders in een Ongewone Tijd 1940-1945* (Zwolle: Uitgeverij Waanders, 2001), p. 47.

¹⁰¹ 'Why all this talk of a new time and a new order?', asked one headline in *De Unie*, 1:32, 28 Mar 1941, p. 1.

¹⁰² See for instance *De Standaard*, 69: 20949, 1 Oct 1940, p. 8.

¹⁰³ Peter Romijn, *Burgemeesters in Oorlogstijd: Besturen Tijdens de Duitse Bezetting* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2006), pp. 17–19, 668.

¹⁰⁴ NIOD, 123/1.1:114. Letter, Marchant d'Ansembourgh to F. Schmidt, copy for Mussert, 26 Nov 1940.

¹⁰⁵ Hirschfeld, p. 43.

‘Leader of the Dutch People’ in 1942. Within the NSB itself Mussert’s position was too strong to dethrone him.¹⁰⁶

Yet the NSB would soon become disillusioned with the *Neuordnung* as well, and this time the ideas of decline would ironically prove a moral rallying point for the Movement. Embarrassingly the Japanese occupied the Dutch East Indies at this time, realising a crucial NSB fear in March 1942, while to their frustration the Germans took a positive view of the Japanese conquest.¹⁰⁷ But nothing did more to dispel the myth of regeneration and reintroduce decline into NSB narratives than the reality of German rule. Although the only legal political organisation in December 1941, the NSB would never be an unequivocal collaborator.¹⁰⁸ The five years of conflict between the NSB and the SS highlights that the growth of the *volkse* current within the movement indicated by no means a simple hegemony. It was in 1940-45 that Mussert’s Golden Age story of decline really came into its own, and was exploited as a rallying myth against the imperialistic ambitions of the SS. The two fascist organisations had superficially similar narratives of decline, but on inspection it quickly becomes evident that these narratives had very different concerns, and that Mussert promoted one antithetical to SS discourse. SS periodicals like *Hamer* were mired in a narrative of the decay of the Germanic peasant-based race, of which the Dutch people were but one part.¹⁰⁹ ‘Moreover [we] deem it erroneous in this time to first point out in various ways the unreal and real differences between us and other Germanic tribes and Peoples. [...] In particular it has been noticed how many have the inclination to place “*The Netherlander*” and “*The German*” in opposition to each other...’¹¹⁰ The forces that had brought about the decay of the Germanic Dutch were ancient European forces, not national ones: the decadent Roman Empire, Latin humanism, the Church, etc.¹¹¹ Mourning the death of peasant culture, *Hamer* pointed the finger at the ‘conquest’ of the countryside by Calvinist preachers, creating a people without *Lebensfreude*: ‘an alien [*volksvreemde*] life view, which does not belong here and only became possible, because a

¹⁰⁶ Jonge, *Het Nationaal-Socialisme in Nederland*, p. 174.

¹⁰⁷ NIOD, 123/2.13:913. Proposal, State Secretariat: Bureau of Indian Affairs, ‘The German press and the Dutch Indies’, 15 January 1944.

¹⁰⁸ *De SS En Nederland: Documenten Uit SS-Archieven 1935-1945*, ed. by N. K. C. A. in ’t Veld, 2 vols (‘S-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1976), pp. 479–83.

¹⁰⁹ E.g. *Storm SS*, 5:1, 6 Apr 1945, p.2.

¹¹⁰ ‘*De Netherlander*” en “*De Duitser*”...’, *Hamer*, 1:1, Oct 1940, p. 2.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 9.

people forgot its own nature'.¹¹² In the Dutch SS weekly *Storm SS*, its editor Feldmeijer wrote: 'The greatest part of our People is no longer conscious of its Germanic origins. It no longer knows [how] to belong to a race...'¹¹³ The essentially pagan and long-term historical perspective on decline promoted by the SS in the Netherlands made people jest that the SS thought history ended in AD 800.¹¹⁴ As one *volkse* writer put it: 'They who think *volks*, see their people rise and fall across the centuries'.¹¹⁵

This was a view of history that fitted awkwardly with Mussert's Golden Age vision of the Netherlands, so that these opposing narratives of the decline of the Netherlands underlined the ideological clash between the NSB and the SS. Some historians have emphasised the similarity of NSB and Nazi discourse during the Occupation, speaking of a *gelijkschakeling* of NSB propaganda.¹¹⁶ But the narratives of decline show that while the groups did share a discourse, they understood ideological themes of decay, degeneration, national humiliation, cultural decline and ultimate regeneration in very different, politically charged, ways. *Volkse* NSB members were overwhelmingly favourably inclined towards the SS, creating sharp internal divisions, but ultimately Mussert remained in control. While the NSB could speak of race and a Germanic regeneration of Europe against the threat of Asiatic hordes, it was clear that the decay Mussert's supporters really feared was not one of their race, but of the historical sovereign nation of the Netherlands. '[F]or 'volk' is not a biological, but a political concept, and the *consciousness* of "belonging together" is the last word.'¹¹⁷

Narratives of decline had a tactical application in this unexpected struggle against nominal allies. The conflict came to a head in the middle of 1943. In a June speech for the party, Mussert spoke of their naivety in regarding every German as a National Socialist and a friend – some he deemed to be imperialists who wanted annexation rather than create a true fascist friendship.¹¹⁸ The *Leider* spoke of great historical Dutch accomplishments, and the virtues of the Dutch Republic: freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, 'ancient Dutch virtues' which had

¹¹² Ibid. p. 19.

¹¹³ *Storm SS*, 11, 11 Apr 1941, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ E.J. Roskam, *De Stem van ons Bloed* (Leiden: Nenasu, 1940), p. 17.

¹¹⁶ Toorn, p. 7.

¹¹⁷ *VoVa*, 12:22, 2 June 1944, p. 5.

¹¹⁸ 410 I. Speech by A.A. Mussert, Veld, p. 1079.

a peculiar resonance juxtaposed with a neo-pagan SS agenda.¹¹⁹ Feldmeijer, who informed on Mussert for Rauter and Himmler, mentioned the great applause the speech received from the audience. He complained that Mussert used a Nazi vocabulary, but twisted its meaning: 'Everything calls itself *grossgermanisch*, and with that means something different altogether. All that has to do with Germanics has become a fashionable term.'¹²⁰ This happened shortly after a brief quarrel in the fascist press over an article published on May 7 in VoVa entitled 'The Judgment of History'. The article struck a very different tone from NSB publications two or three years earlier, and spoke of the necessary suffering that occurs whenever the new is born out of the old.¹²¹ It proceeded to apply a familiar tactic: VoVa compared the present state of the nation to the historical decline of the Dutch Republic, and likened the 'current revolution' to that of the French and the Patriot movement of the Batavian Republic. The current revolution 'makes our own revolutionary past of "historical antiquity" come to life once more...'.¹²² Feldmeijer responded furiously in *Storm SS*: 'These are the same people, whose National Socialism does not in fact differ from that of other *bourgeois* ... who also at every opportunity went on and on again about the great and glorious past and about "Us in the 80-Years War"...'.¹²³ When faced with a choice of between the Nazi New Order as the rebirth the NSB had been waiting for, and his own vision of a return of the Dutch Golden Age, Mussert chose the latter. 'He [Mussert] has, as before, remained the *Spießher* and separatist, and in small circles expresses his hatred for the SS at every opportunity.'¹²⁴

By 1944 NSB found itself in a state of extraordinary isolation. In the last two years of the Occupation the administration was almost entirely in the hands of the SS which had managed to consolidate its jurisdiction after the death of Schmidt. Anti-Nazi resistance grew among the Dutch populace, which increasingly targeted NSB members, including assassinations of the rank and file.¹²⁵ In September 1944 the Allies invaded the Netherlands, causing panic among NSB members fearing that *bijltjesdag* [Retribution Day] had come. As NSB membership numbers spiked

¹¹⁹ Veld, pp. 1080–83.

¹²⁰ Veld, p. 1062.

¹²¹ 'Het Oordeel der Geschiedenis', *VoVa*, 10:18, 7 May 1943, p. 1.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Storm SS*, 3:6, 14 May 1943, p. 1.

¹²⁴ Veld, p. 1016.

¹²⁵ 498. Rauter to Himmler, 13 Jan 1944, Den Haag Veld, p. 1278; Jong, Kok, and Somers, pp. 57–59.

following the invasion in 1940, so they dropped as Allied troops closed in and captured The Hague (*Reichskommissariat* offices were moved to Apeldoorn).

For the final months of the war private letters survive to and from Mussert, which addressed the sorrows and anxieties of remaining loyalists, contextualising their suffering as part of the grand narrative of decline. One letter wished the *Leider* a happy New Year with the wish that 'you may also this year be preserved for the Movement and that you will be spared more great disappointments [the September crisis].'¹²⁶ Several letters are from NSB members whose children had died in the war, usually as Waffen-SS volunteers on the Eastern Front, and sought consolation from Mussert. One letter from Mussert spoke of '[a]ll the evil forces that have been unleashed to prevent this [the protection of People and Fatherland]; they exist in the N.S.B. as well, and they made themselves clearly recognisable precisely after September.'¹²⁷ In letters Mussert spoke of the necessity to experience setbacks to become a true National Socialist, and of the suffering of the Dutch people. While he still showed some faith in the final victory, there was little sense that the situation would improve. 'Although our land has now been plunged into misery and the lowest point probably has not yet been reached, we keep believing in the final victory, which will bring the foundation of National Socialism, through which our people will rise...' was one of the standard phrases with which Mussert now signed off his letters.¹²⁸ VoVa expressed the same sentiment.¹²⁹ In a speech in February 1944 for District and Circle leaders, Mussert stated that '[e]verything has its origin, rise, and downfall. We merely hope that the downfall will not come in our time and if National Socialism wins maybe Europe can still be saved again, for now.'¹³⁰

As the NSB collapsed in the face of military defeat, Anton Mussert, in a final speech in The Hague, recognised the reality of the situation, without illusions about a sudden reversal of fortunes. 'Admittedly, our being together here has no influence on the war events whatsoever'.¹³¹ He emphasised the ordeal of the movement, and of the Dutch people during war and occupation, and noted that this 'vale of suffering' was a consequence of the political decay of the 1930s. But, he noted, there is no Good Friday without Easter, and from present hardship the

¹²⁶ NIOD, 123/1.1:260. Letter, [name restricted] to Mussert, 5 Jan 1945.

¹²⁷ Ibid. Letter, Mussert to [name restricted], 15 Jan 1945, Almelo.

¹²⁸ Ibid. Letter, Mussert to [name restricted], 17 Jan 1945, Almelo.

¹²⁹ 'History has led our people to a new low. It will be our task to get it out of there.', *VoVa*, 12:43, 27 Oct 1944, p.2.

¹³⁰ NIOD, 123/1.1:231. Speech MS, Mussert to District and Circle leaders, 26 Feb 1944. p. 1.

¹³¹ NIOD, 123/1.1:256. Speech, Mussert, 'Ons Volksch Ontwaken', 7 Apr 1945, Pulchri Studio Den Haag, p. 1.

future is born. The history of the NSB would know three periods: 1931-1940, 1940-1945/46, and beyond that, the full blossoming of the Movement.¹³²

We are now on the threshold of a third period in the existence of our movement, that third period, which will give us the much desired opportunity to finally start reconstruction. From the ruins of the present a larger, stronger, more healthy Dutch people than ever before will re-awaken; that is our calling.¹³³

Conclusion

Narratives of decline in the National Socialist Movement were not inseparable from the larger story of national rebirth. While the meaning of rebirth was vague, decline was detailed and elaborate. Taking Griffin's claim of the importance of palingenetic myth to fascism as a starting point, this article has examined one key aspect of that myth in NSB discourse, and foregrounded the variety of narratives. Laying bare the different narratives of *verval*, from the decadence of humanism and French revolutionary ideology, through urbanisation's debilitating effects on the race, to the fading glory of Dutch empire, it has become apparent that there was no generic fascist understanding of national decay – not even within a single movement. I have also shown the importance of the medium of narrative production, particularly the organisation of VoVa, which played a key role in strategies of propaganda. VoVa's news-driven discourse enhanced narratives of decline, and did much to create a sense of *Dutch* decline, and by extension a *Dutch fascist* solution. Nor were these narratives window-dressing; they represented and produced ideological difference.

The significance of such differences was foregrounded during the Occupation, when NSB collaboration ironically brought Mussert's followers into ceaseless conflict with the SS. What seemed at first like a definitive move towards narratives of rebirth with the establishment of the New Order turned out to be a false sense of a new beginning. Relations between foreign and native fascists quickly soured as conflicting interests and ideological goals became apparent, and narratives of decline proved to be a useful tool in the discursive strategy through which the NSB enacted – limited and ineffective – resistance against SS hegemony in the Netherlands.

¹³² Ibid. p. 17.

¹³³ Ibid. p. 22.

This is an original perspective on the ideological character of the Dutch Movement, which has emphasised the link between narratives of decline and fascist ideologies, and qualified the still popular understanding of the NSB as an ideologically haphazard movement destined for domination by German Nazism. Instead, this study has brought out the centrality of Mussert's personal vision of the decline of the Dutch empire since the Golden Age, its ubiquity in official NSB discourse, and its consistency throughout the party's life span. This narrative of decline was an ideological constant which only died with Mussert. While some contemporaries and historians have highlighted Mussert's bourgeois liberal character to question his radicalism, his Golden Age narrative of decline grants us insight into the peculiar compatibility between liberal patriotism, and radical fascist culture.

This shows up NSB ideology not just as 'generically fascist' in its obsession with decline, but as a surprising heir to nineteenth century liberal historic romanticism, not unique to the Netherlands. This awkward cultural intersection of liberalism and fascism problematises the understanding of fascism as 'palingenetic'; rather than clearly delineating fascism in interwar Europe, it emphasises significant similarities with one of its traditional enemies. In other words a sense of decline, and a corresponding longing for national rebirth was not only something shared by fascists across the continent, but also with liberal nationalists, a shared mythic language that can go some way in explaining the attraction of liberals to fascist movements. Here, rather than distinguishing a unique fascist essence, palingenetic myth seems to mix it up in a much wider cultural spectrum.

Europe's smaller indigenous fascist movements, then, appear less likely to have been unilaterally influenced by more powerful role models (Italy, Germany), but also, and potentially more significantly, by indigenous political cultures, even ones supposedly incompatible with fascism. This could be understood *mutatis mutandis* as the hybridisation that António Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis have pointed to,¹³⁴ but I would caution against regarding the NSB as some sort of para-fascist liberal hybrid, and instead heed how contemporaries constructed their ideologies. Fascism was an expansive concept for many European contemporaries. Core myths are clearly one useful basis for analysing fascism comparatively, but when we examine their production we may have to look beyond merely different 'fascisms'.

¹³⁴ Introduction to *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe*, ed. by António Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 3–5.